



Marketing in Confinement: Lessons from the Grateful Dead

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Ultimately, we are all participants.

Participatory Culture is a term coined by Professor, **Henry Jenkins** [1], of the **University of Southern California**. The term refers to the vast and frequent participation of people in media in the age of technology and information. The discussion, which was ignited by Jenkins some 15 years ago, is more relevant than ever during the global confinement imposed on us by the COVID-19 crisis.

In the '**pre-online world**', participation usually had a significant physical dimension (for example, protest was pre-dominantly linked to physical participation in demonstrations). Today, we would describe this as '**offline behavior**'.

In the age of technology, an enormously wide range of participation possibilities are just one click away for most people. Technology dramatically lowered physical and psychological barriers for participation thus creating a new type of culture which affects online and offline behavior.

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, we all participate in our media-saturated world one way or another. We do so, for example, by leaving a comment on a news story, 'liking' a YouTube video, rating a movie, an Uber driver, a WhatsApp call or by purchasing a product on Amazon. Participation can even take a more passive form such as using a navigation software or even reading this very article.

Data mining companies, reportedly, are able to collect more than 15K data-point per participant, many are directly linked to our participatory choices. Meta-data analysis, which is at the core of predictive segmentation, is expected to exponentially increase its data-cropping capabilities as the world is expected to enter the age of quantum computing in the foreseeable future.

Jenkins developed the concept in 2006 as part of his academic research of **Fandom Communities**. Fandom is a term mostly used by social anthropologists to describe groups of people connected through their comradeship, togetherness, affiliation, interest, **'fannish pleasures'**, values, idioms, and even admiration of one central subject. Members of the fandom usually develop a sense of camaraderie and even partnership with other members.

The concept of **Fandom** is derived from the general concept of **Fan Interest**, usually defined around a common area of interest, famous individuals, sport clubs, religious affiliation (especially in the charismatic movements where religious following is centered around the charisma of one individual) and consumer brands. These online fandom communities were described by researcher **Mark Poster [2]** as part of the **'second media age' [3]**. Unlike the **'first media age'**, the second age of new media is marked by "interactivity and subjectivity afforded by internet technologies."

A good example of fandom is the **Deadhead [4]** phenomenon, the subculture evolved over the years around the **Grateful Dead [5]** rock band and which was thoroughly researched in recent years.



(Photo Credit: www.pixabay.com/photos/music)

Today, the **Grateful Dead** represents a classic fan-based marketing model precisely because they allowed their fans to become a voice in the closely guarded entertainment industry of the 1970's.

Most notably, the band established a direct channel of communications with their fans, informing them of upcoming shows, allowing them to bootleg and document their frequent concerts (they even created a special concert section for fans interested in recording the shows) and generally established an unprecedented level of intimacy and accessibility with their fan base. **The Grateful Dead, de facto, cut off the industry's intermediaries long before the phenomenon was known as 'disruption'**. Their approach is widely recognized as a pioneering force in affiliate-based marketing and perhaps even served as the inspiration to other stars of the creative world to seek out direct relationships with their fans, such as **Adele [6], Taylor Swift and Neil Young**.

Consumer brands can learn a great deal from these transitions in the entertainment industry to establish direct and algorithm-free relationship with their fandom. One effective way to 'own' your audience is to embrace the often-untapped resource of **direct email marketing**. Brands can reach members and participants of their fandom, who explicitly expressed interest in the brand, inexpensively and without the hassle of 'secondary markets' often created by ill-intentioned algorithms. Participants, for their part, could be rewarded with exclusive and early access to information and retail value opportunities. Undoubtedly, email marketing is under-utilized by major consumer brands. They may have massive following on social media, an abundance of nicely interfaced (and under-used) mobile device applications and even an impressive network of brand champions — but their email listings and database is usually insignificant.



(Photo Credit: www.pixabay.com)

Another method centers around the participants' **cellular phone number**. The rationale: when given the opportunity to mobilize cellular numbers between providers, participants prefer not to change their number. **The cellular number then becomes a permanent part of the participants' biography, like a social security number**. This is not the case with email addresses that are often switched or replaced. Therefore, for the astute marketer, **direct text marketing** by collecting cellular numbers is the old-new way to establish direct contract with their fan-base.

Brands that spent years cultivating a strong and direct connection with their audience enjoy a clear advantage in the new emerging landscape of **Participatory Culture**.

These new participants are loyal to the brand and drive up its profitability (i.e. the case of **Apple**'s transition from a niche technology brand to one of the world's most valued brands [7]).

In the age of participation, brands must try to better understand and serve their fans and participants, by genuinely listening to their needs, expectation and aspirations, as well their own staff and employees.

These very abilities – to listen, absorb and adapt – will be tightly correlated to the brand's ability to quickly recover for the economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

Notes:

[1] Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture (Postmillennial Pop); 2018 by **Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green**

[2] **Mark Poster** (d. 2012) was a UC-Irvine Professor of Media who researched, amongst other mediums, digital new media of the late 20th and early 21st century (including television, databases, hypertext and the internet)

[3] Technology, Fandom and Community in the Second Media Age; May 24, 2016 by **Rhiannon Bury**

[4] Marketing Lessons from the Grateful Dead: What Every Business Can Learn from the Most Iconic Band in History; 2010 by **David Meerman Scott and Brian Halligan**

[5] A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead; 2003 by **Dennis McNally**

[6] The Amazing Marketing Machine Behind Adele; Fortune Magazine; November 7th, 2015, by **Chris Morris** (<https://fortune.com/2015/11/07/adele-hello-marketing-machine/>)

[7] Apple's Secret of Success – Traditional Marketing Vs. Cult Marketing; 2011, By **Sascha Schneiders**